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SUBJECT: PRE-ELECTION UPDATE: EX-TRT FIGURES FORM PARTY,
ARMY CHIEF TO BE NAMED SOON, ECT NIXES EU MOU

REF: BANGKOK 4793

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James F. Entwistle reason 1.4 (b)
) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Many top former Thai Rak Thai officials have agreed to work together to form a new political party; this group contains many important figures, but its strength in the coming election is hard to assess because the most important of these politicians are ineligible to run for office. The group is not aligned with former PM Thaksin. Prime Minister Surayud should soon seek the King's approval for a new Army Commander; it appears that GEN Anupong Paojinda is now the leading contender for the job. The Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) Chairman has said the ECT will not sign an MOU with the European Commission (EC) to formalize EC election observation; this likely means the EC will not send a full observer mission, but EC member states or the European Parliament might. End Summary.

TRT OFFICIALS COALESCE TO FORM A NEW PARTY

2. (C) On September 11, a group of former top Thai Rak Thai (TRT) officials announced their intention to form a new political party. They have dubbed their party-to-be as the "For the Motherland Party" (Pak Puea Pandin). (Note: Present at the ceremony were Surakiart Sathirathai, Sanoh Thienthong, Somsak Thepsuthin, Pinij Jarusombat, Suwit Khunkitti, Suranand Vejajiva, Vatana Asavahame, and others. Most of them are ineligible to run for elected office or hold political party positions, because they were members of the TRT executive board when the party was dissolved. Vatana was not affiliated with TRT, but his reputation was damaged by public revelations in the early 1990's that he was ineligible for a U.S. visa because he had profited from the drug trade. End Note.) Suranand told us before the event that Surakiart, a former Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, was the key person pressing to pull these figures together. The group did not announce a leader. It is widely reported that they have asked UNCTAD Secretary-General Supachai Panitchapakdi to leave his current job and head the party, but Supachai so far has shown no interest.

3. (C) Comment: This group includes most of the prominent TRT

faction leaders who have not already joined the People's Power Party. Conventional wisdom may hold that the Motherland figures' networks include enough former legislators that this group could rival the Democrat Party in coming elections. However, the group currently lacks a charismatic leader; a known major source of funding (most of these figures, like Sanoh, are seen as brokers who channel others' funds, rather than as financiers); and a compelling political stance or ideology (the People's Power Party clearly represents the Thaksin legacy and has the former PM's endorsement; most of the Motherland figures who were in TRT deserted the party soon after the coup). End Comment.

ARMY CHIEF TO BE NAMED SOON

¶4. (C) The announcement of the annual military reshuffle has been delayed several times over the contentious issue of the new Army commander-in-chief, according to a variety of sources. Some of the delay was attributed to the need to find an appropriate slot for GEN Saphrang Kalayanamitr, the hot-headed and outspoken coup leader who lost his position as front-runner (reftel). GEN Sonthi himself appeared to prefer Army Chief of Staff Montri Sangkhasap, who was personally close to Sonthi, and who is well-liked within the Army. It now appears, however, that GEN Anupong Paojinda will get the job. GEN Anupong, who played an important role in the coup, has been extremely discreet, rarely speaks to the press, and has ruffled no feathers. As a member of pre-cadet class 10 (Thaksin,s class) he would have three years to serve as Army chief before his mandatory retirement.

¶5. (C) The reshuffle list goes from the Supreme Command to

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the Prime Minister, who is highly unlikely to make any changes. He will forward it to the palace for the King,s approval. The results should be known publicly very soon.

ECT CHAIRMAN WELCOMES OBSERVERS, REJECTS MOU

¶6. (SBU) Press reports quote Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) Chairman Apichart Sukhaggonond as rejecting the European Commission's (EC) proposed MOU on election observation. The ECT's leadership reportedly was unanimous in adopting this policy. The ECT continues to publicly welcome EU and other foreign observers, but the Thai side interpreted some aspects of the EC's proposed MOU as less than fully respectful of Thai sovereignty. (reftel)

¶7. (SBU) A diplomat from an EU member state told us on September 12 that he was unaware of any correspondence from the ECT formally conveying the ECT's rejection of the MOU. Should the ECT provide such formal notification, this would mark the end of EC efforts to send a full observer mission, although EU member states would remain free to send observers under their own national auspices. Our contact also noted that at least one member of the European Parliament (EP) recently expressed interest in arranging an EP observation mission consisting of EU parliamentarians.

BOYCE